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Divers find lost battleship HMS Victoria

Divers have located the former flagship of the British Mediterranean Fleet, HMS Victoria, lost in 1893 out of Tripoli, Libya, while attempting an ill-conceived anchoring manoeuvre. 358 men - half the entire crew - including Vice Admiral Tyron, were lost.



Lebanese-Austrian diver Christian Francis had researched the wreck and had been conducting a search since 1994. Information from local fishermen about an unusual obstruction rich in fish helped lead Francis to the wreck's position. He first dived the wreck along with British diver Mark Ellyatt on 22 August, and the pair were quickly able to identify the wreck from the props, fittings and dimensions.

The wreck is located in just over 100m, but has her bows driven deep into the seabed and sticks up perpendicular to the seabed, with the propellers at 25m. It is estimated that a quarter of the ship's 103m length is embedded into the seabed.

The unusual position of the wreck appears to have been caused by the presence of two 110 ton guns, both mounted onto a single forward turret, which helped drag HMS Victoria swiftly underwater bow-first after a collision with HMS Camperdown.

The Admiralty had allowed the positioning of the two guns - which could not fire astern - on the basis that "no British battleship would be called upon to fire astern."

The two battleships famously collided on 22 June 1893 after Vice Admiral Tyrol ordered that both perform a 180 degree turn towards each other, when there was insufficient space to make the turn. Two officers onboard Victoria voiced concern about the manoeuvre but were over-ruled. When second-in-command Rear-Admiral Markham, aboard HMS Camperdown, hesitated to execute the turn, a terse signal was sent asking him what he was waiting for.

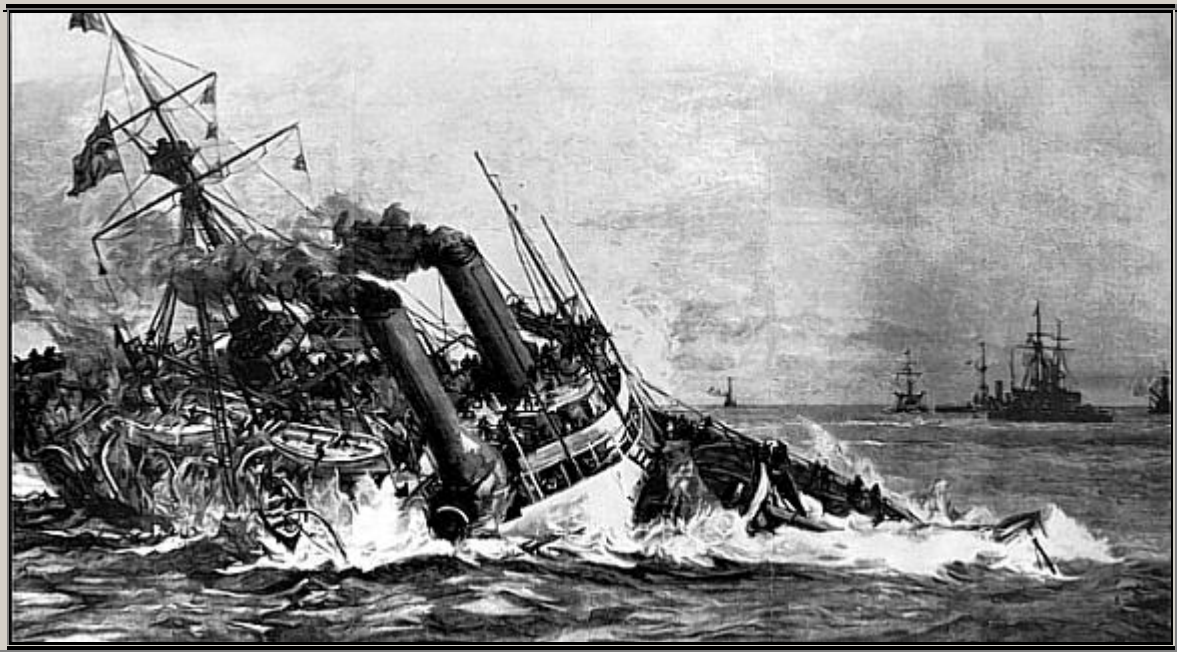
Tyrol was well known for his love of precise turns and close naval formations, and the exercise appears to have been carried out to provide an impressive spectacle for onlookers.

As the ships turned towards each other, the bow of the Camperdown tore a large hole in Victoria's side and water flooded in, causing a serious list to starboard. As the crew attempted to make ready a repair, the bows of Victoria dipped below the waves, her stern, with propellers still running, was lifted clear of the water and she sank rapidly. It took just 13 minutes from the moment of collision for the ship to sink, resulting in 358 of the 715 men aboard to be taken down with her.



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The Loss of the 'Victoria' 22 June 1893



The best known and most tragic collision between ships in the history of the Royal Navy was that between the battleship *Victoria* - the flagship of the British Mediterranean Fleet - and the *Camperdown*, on 22 June 1893.

The *Victoria* was launched in 1887. She was to have been called the *Renown*, but as she was ready for launching in Queen Victoria's Jubilee Year, her name was changed to that of the reigning monarch.

She carried two enormous Armstrong 16.25-inch guns weighing 110 tons each and firing a 1,600 lb. projectile. They were so large and heavy that only two could be carried. Both were mounted in one turret forward, which meant that they could not fire astern. This limitation was accepted by the Board of the Admiralty because "no British battleship would be called upon to fire astern." The *Victoria* had only one sister ship, the *Sans Pareil*, which was in company with her when she sank. They each displaced 10,420 tons.



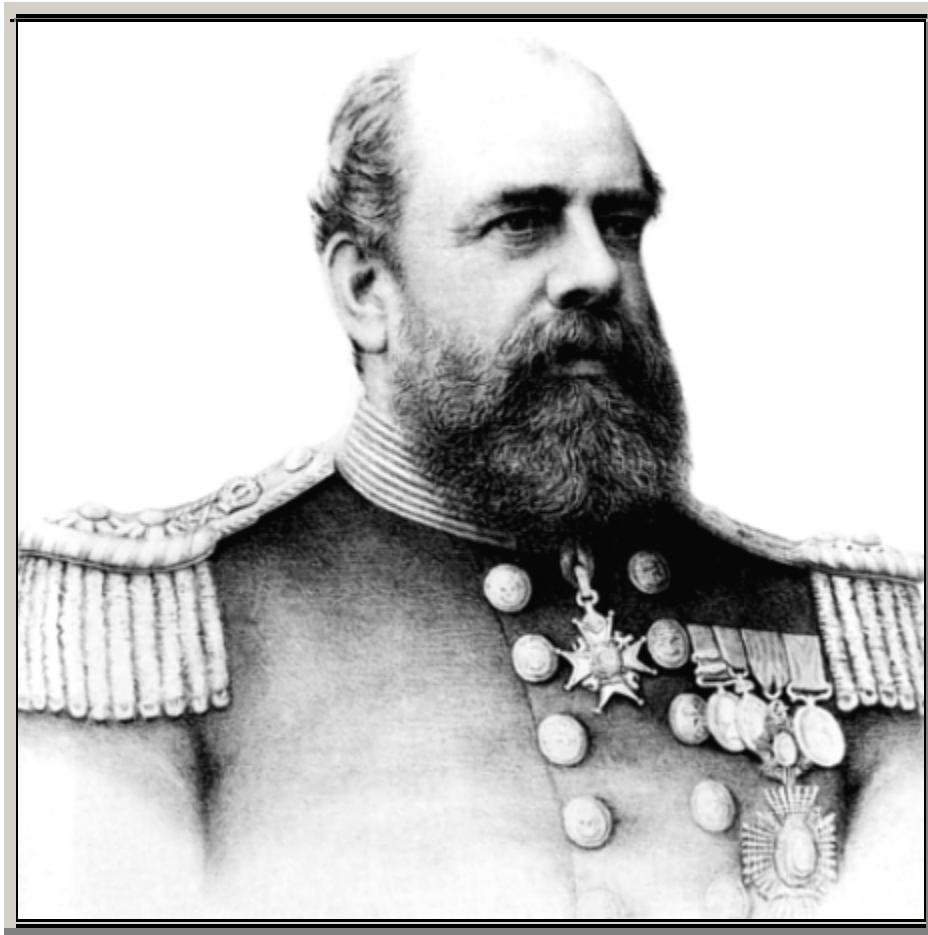
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The *Camperdown* was a slightly older ship and displaced 10,600 tons. She was launched in 1883 as one of the 'Admiral' Class, having an armament of four 13.5-inch guns each weighing 67 tons, mounted in one twin turret forward and another twin turret aft.

On a hot afternoon in the Mediterranean in June 1893 the British Mediterranean Fleet was about to anchor, in formation, off Tripoli [on the coast of Syria - now in Lebanon].

The fleet, consisting of 10 battleships, or large armoured cruisers, of about 10,000 tons each (and one despatch vessel), had been organised into two divisions. They were formed in these divisions, in line ahead disposed abeam, with the *Victoria* leading the first division and *Camperdown* leading the second division.

The fleet was under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon, who flew his flag in the *Victoria*.



The second-in-command was Rear-Admiral Markham who flew his flag in the *Camperdown*.



Admiral Tryon was an expert in fleet handling, and had trained his captains to expect a variety of complicated manoeuvres at any time. He was a great martinet, a large taciturn man who sought counsel from nobody and rarely informed his staff of his intentions.

On this occasion, however, Tryon had discussed his anchoring plan with his Flag Captain, the Staff Commander and Flag Lieutenant. He told them he intended to form up in two columns steering away from the coast with the columns 1,200 yards apart, with ships in column at normal station-keeping distance apart, which in those days was 400 yards. He intended to reverse the course of the fleet by turning the columns inwards, leaders turning together and each ship following in succession the next ahead. He then intended to close the columns to 400 yards apart. Finally he intended to turn the whole fleet together 90 degrees to port, and then to anchor the fleet.

It was intended to be an impressive sight to those on shore who witnessed it, and indeed it would have been. Even in those days it was not often possible to see ten large warships anchoring together. The *Victoria* would have hoisted a two-flag signal which denoted 'anchor instantly.' The *Camperdown* would have repeated the hoist, and, as *Victoria's* signalmen hauled it down, ten blacksmiths armed with hammers would have knocked off the slips holding the cables and down would have simultaneously splashed ten anchors.

The Staff Commander and the Flag Captain remarked to the Admiral that 1,200 yards was insufficient to allow the leading ships to turn together towards each other, and the Staff Commander suggested that 1,600 yards would be better, but even that would have been insufficient.

The Admiral agreed, but later told his Staff Lieutenant to close the columns to 1,200 yards.

The signal was hoisted and the Staff Commander, seeing that 1,200 yards was hoisted, told the Flag Lieutenant that he must have made a mistake as the Admiral had agreed to 1,600 yards. The Flag Lieutenant therefore went to the Admiral, who was in his sea cabin, and queried whether it should be 1,200 yards or 1,600, explaining that "1,200" was flying. The Admiral, somewhat tersely, told him to leave it at 1,200 and to execute the signal as soon as possible.


The fleet was formed accordingly. It should be noted that, when the fleet was formed in columns like this, the normal distance between columns laid down in the manoeuvring instructions was in those days "the distance apart of ships [in this case 400 yards] multiplied by the number of ships in the longest column." In this case the longest column had six ships in it and the distance apart of columns should have been $400 \times 6 = 2,400$ yds., which would have left plenty of room for carrying out the intended manoeuvre.

The distance between columns was worked out to allow for a favourite manoeuvre in those days - forming a single line by turning leading ships of columns 90 degrees to port



or starboard, the remaining ships following their leaders in succession. By this means a single line could be formed - at right angles to the original line of advance.

If the distance between columns was too small then in this manoeuvre the end ships of columns in the direction of the turn might have got muddled up with those of columns not in the direction of the turn, with a consequent risk of collision. If the distance between columns equalled the number of ships in the columns multiplied by their intervals apart, the end of the column in the direction of turn should have fitted perfectly with the leading ship of the column *away* from the direction of the turn.

The fleet increased speed to 8.8 knots, and shortly afterwards, at 15.00, the Admiral directed his Flag Lieutenant to hoist two signals. One was addressed to the first division and directed it to turn in succession, preserving the order of the fleet,  16 points (180 degrees) to port. The second was addressed to the second division and directed it to turn in succession, preserving the order of the fleet, 16 points to starboard.

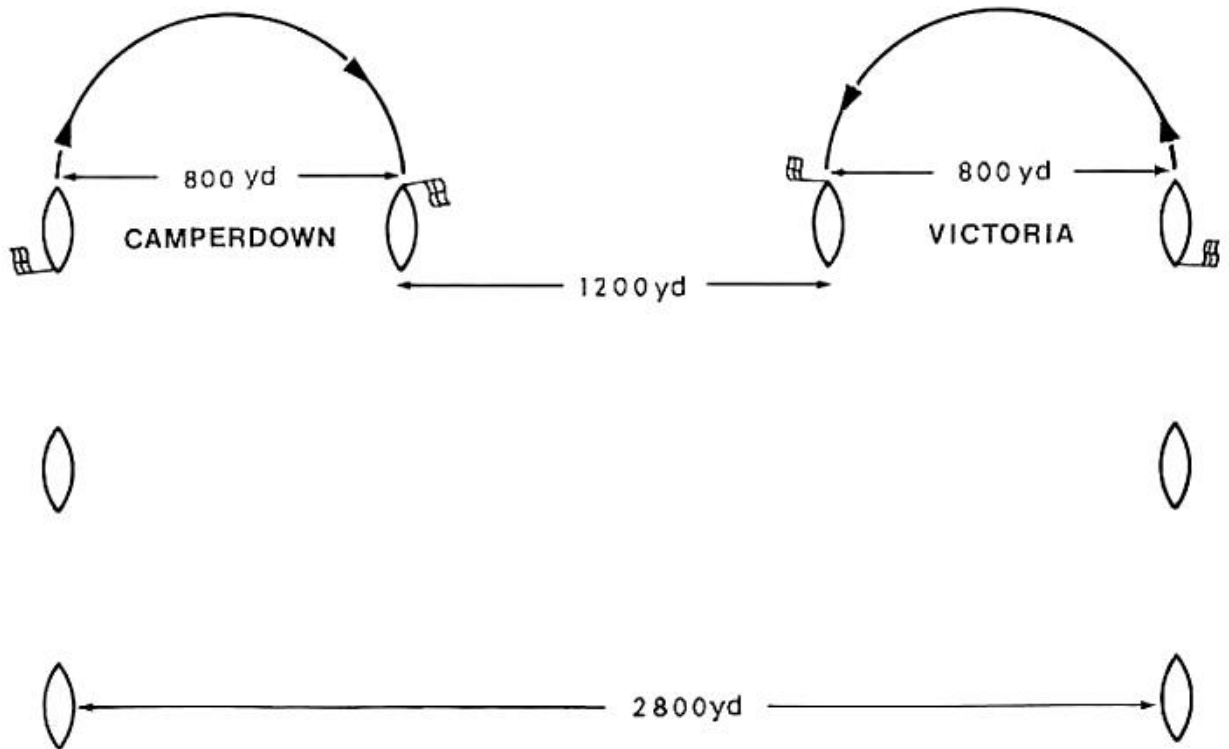
The columns were thus to turn towards each other. The signals were made in separate hoists and it would have been possible to execute one signal (by hauling it down) before the other. However - the Flag Lieutenant knew perfectly well what was in the Admiral's mind.

The turning-circle diameters of *Victoria* and *Camperdown*, under "tactical" rudder, were each about 800 yards. Thus even the 1,600 yards which the Staff Commander had suggested was only barely sufficient for the manoeuvre.


If the two battleships had used full rudder their turning circle diameters would have been reduced to about 600 yards. It would then have been possible for the two ships to turn inwards without colliding, but with only 20 yards or so to spare. However, the standing instructions were that during manoeuvres tactical rudder should be used.



What The Distance Apart Should Have Been



It must have been obvious to every captain in the fleet that the manoeuvre was an exceedingly dangerous one - yet every ship, with the sole exception of the *Camperdown*, went "close up" with her answering pennant in full acknowledgment of the signal (it was - and still is - standard practice to keep the answering pennant "at the dip" if the signal is not understood).

Camperdown, being the leading ship in her column, repeated the hoist, but Rear Admiral Markham - aboard her - ordered the repeated hoist to be kept at the dip, signifying that he did not understand the signal. At the same time he  ordered that a semaphore signal to the flagship should be made indicating that he did not understand the flagship's signal.

However, the semaphore was never sent. Admiral Tryon - "ever impatient" - ordered *Camperdown's* pennants to be shown, an expression of impatience which no officer would like, and sent a semaphore signal of his own saying "What are you waiting for?" Rear Admiral Markham, seeing this and having complete confidence in his superior officer, thought that Admiral Tryon would solve the problem somehow. He therefore had his own semaphore cancelled and ordered that the repeated signal be hoisted close up.

At the subsequent court-martial Markham was questioned as to why, given that he knew the intended manoeuvre was dangerous - if not impossible, he had allowed the repeated



signal to be hoisted close up? He answered that he had such faith in Admiral Tryon that he thought that he must have some trick up his sleeve.

Markham considered that there were two possibilities - either the C-in-C would execute the order to the Second Division (Markham's column) first and, when this division was safely turned, would turn his own division; or he intended to turn *Victoria* and the First Division with less rudder and therefore turn *outside* the *Camperdown's* division.

Nonetheless when the signal was executed the two divisions were turned simultaneously and *Camperdown* started turning to starboard, while *Victoria* started turning to port, with both using tactical rudder. Even then, although it was obvious to all the onlookers that a collision was imminent, both Captains failed to put their inner screws astern, not being prepared to do so without permission from their division commanders.

In fact Captain Burke - the commanding officer of the *Victoria* - had to ask three times for permission to put his port propeller astern before it was eventually given.

The two battleships met halfway between their respective columns. *Camperdown* struck the *Victoria* on the flagship's starboard side, opening up an enormous hole at and below the waterline. *Camperdown's* ram had penetrated the flagship's side by about 9 feet, at a point about 12 feet below the surface. It struck a transverse bulkhead almost directly and, as the two ships swung together, the breach became enlarged to about 100 square ft.

Just before the impact the order "close watertight doors and out collision mat" had been given aboard the flagship - but only a few doors had been closed when the collision took place. Thus water was able to get into a coal bunker just forward of a stokehold. *Victoria* began to list to starboard, and the list started to increase more rapidly when the starboard battery began to flood as water entered the broadside gun ports.

As the collision occurred "Collision Stations" was piped aboard *Victoria*, and the crew lined up four deep on the port side. At first it was hoped to beach the flagship and the gallant men in the engine-room and stokehold were still keeping the machinery running.

However, by now the ship was down by the bows as well as listing heavily. Suddenly the bows went down and the stern rose, with the screws still turning. *Victoria* foundered soon afterwards - only 13 minutes after the collision.

The order "Abandon Ship" was given just before the end, and the ship's company - which had remained in good order - then broke ranks. The list was by then so heavy that it was difficult to leave the ship - many men were left on board and went down with the ship. In all, 358 were lost, including Vice Admiral Tryon. 357 officers and men were rescued, among them Commander John Jellicoe, the *Victoria's* Executive Officer, who went on to become C-in-C of the Grand Fleet during the First World War and arguably Britain's greatest Admiral since Nelson.□-



Admiral Tryon's last words were 'It's all my fault' and at the court martial he was found entirely to blame. No one can tell what was in his mind . . .one perhaps can only assume he had some sort of mental blackout, as he was probably working under a strain.

What *is* quite inexplicable is how 11 Captains and one Rear-Admiral could all have acknowledged the signal ordering the turn 'received and understood', and how Admiral Tryon's own staff, who knew the manoeuvre to be dangerous, did not expostulate more with him when the signal was hoisted. The only explanation is that both his staff and his Captains had such infinite faith in him that they thought he had some last-minute manoeuvre up his sleeve to save the day. Also, it must not be forgotten that he was a difficult man to approach, and it was perhaps a brave staff officer who queried a manoeuvre he had ordered.

[Text from John Marriott's "Disaster at Sea" [Ian Allan, London 1987](#) pp. 38-43]